

Educator Perceptions of Soft Skill Development: An Examination within the Malaysian Public Higher Education Sector

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Abstract: Recognition of the importance of soft skills in today's workforce has gained increasing momentum, with educators and industry bodies identifying that generic skills are vitally important to business success. Despite this acknowledgement, a survey of the current literature highlights that many higher education institutions (HEIs) maintain a stronger emphasis on subject-specific knowledge and skill development when compared to soft skills. A number of factors have been shown to influence the development of soft skills including demographic makers, professional body/accreditation requirements and educator personal expectations or views. In this study, the focus is on those educator perceptions which influence the teaching and learning of soft skills. The study is set in Malaysia, where the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) has formally acknowledged the importance of seven soft skills. Semi-structured interviews were used to examine the views of 25 educators from five Malaysian Public HEIs. Findings from the interviews showed that educator beliefs and their personal expectations or views influenced their emphasis on the teaching and learning of soft skills. The findings of the study have implications for educators, HEIs and policy makers, and for future research into the effectiveness, roles and responsibilities of HEIs in this important area.

Keywords: Soft Skills, Higher Education, Teaching and Learning

Introduction

CHANGING DEMANDS OF work, changing work environments, and changing employment patterns and contexts have led to a reconsideration of the skills and attributes needed by graduates as they seek employment at the end of a university degree. There are increased demands for work ready graduates to possess high levels of what are known as generic or soft skills, as well as the more focused discipline specific skills of their chosen field. This has led to an increasingly complex landscape associated with soft skill initiatives in many levels of education on the international stage. Issues associated with definition and conceptualisation, as well as delivery and assessment have been the focus of increased research in recent times.

Soft skills are known by many terms in different contexts and surroundings. In Australian higher education institutions (HEIs) these skills have been referred to as generic skills, and more recently are amongst those known as graduate attributes (Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training [DEST], n.d.). In contrast, industry refers to

these skills as employability skills (National Centre for Vocational Education Research [NCVER], 2003). The preferred terms also vary by country as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Terms used in Various Countries to Describe Soft Skills

Country	Term
United Kingdom	Core skills, key skills, common skills
New Zealand	Essential skills
Australia	Key competencies, employability skills, generic skills
Canada	Employability skills
United States	Basic skills, necessary skills, workplace know how
Singapore	Critical enabling skills
France	Transferable skills
Germany	Key qualifications
Switzerland	Trans-disciplinary goals
Denmark	Process independent qualifications
Note. From <i>Defining generic skills: At a glance</i> (p. 2), by NCVER, 2003. Retrieved January 29, 2008 from http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1361.html . Copyright 2003 by the NCVER, provided under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Australia http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/license .	

The term soft skills has been employed here as the preferred term adopted in Malaysia (Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia [KPTM], 2006). The Malaysian Public HEI curricula, recommended by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) in 2006, incorporates a focus on seven soft skills: communication, critical thinking and problem solving, teamwork, lifelong learning and information management, entrepreneurship, moral and professional ethics and leadership.

Previous research suggests that within HEIs, subject-specific knowledge and skills are strongly emphasised, yet development of soft skills is an area needing more attention (Armstrong & Kleiner, 1996; Harvey, 1993; Precision Consultancy for Business, Industry and Higher Education Collaboration Council [BIHECC], 2007). In particular, how educators¹ integrate soft skills into teaching and learning processes needs to be better understood.

Soft Skills in the Curriculum

The MOHE soft skills curriculum suggests three approaches for development of soft skills in students (see Figure 1):

1. Incorporation into the formal activities of teaching and learning in an embedded or stand-alone model
2. Parallel support programs which have academic or non-academic foci

¹ In this paper, the term educators refers to those directly involved in the delivery of curriculum to students.